

**Report to the Utilities and Energy Committee
Regarding Maximum Fee for Blocking or Unblocking Access to Audiotext
Services, Pursuant to 35-A M.R.S.A. § 803**

I. Background

35-A M.R.S.A. § 803 authorizes telephone utilities to provide customers with an opportunity to block the access of audiotext service providers¹ to a customer's telephone line and establishes a maximum fee of \$5.00 for this service after an initial service offering that is free of charge. The subsection requires that, every 4 years, the Public Utilities Commission (Commission) examine the appropriateness of the \$5.00 fee and report to the Utilities and Energy Committee recommendations for changes in the fee.

II. Commission Recommendation

Pursuant to § 803, the Commission has reviewed the appropriateness of the \$5 maximum fee that collecting telephone utilities may charge for the blocking or unblocking of access to audiotext services by customers of the utilities. The Commission believes that, if the Legislature continues to believe that audiotext blocking and unblocking is a feature that should be available to all consumers, the \$5 maximum fee remains appropriate and no statutory change is necessary.

III. Commission Review

Audiotext blocking service is used by approximately 10-15% of the telephone customers in the State, and the percentage of customers employing blocking has actually declined over the past two years. Advances in telephone switching technology have made the process of blocking or unblocking access to audiotext services relatively simple to accomplish. Verizon, the State's largest local telephone utility, does not charge customers for blocking or unblocking requests. However, many smaller telephone utilities charge the maximum \$5.00 fee. No telephone utility has reported problems with the service or with cost burdens imposed by the audiotext statute in general or, specifically, the \$5 maximum fee.

¹ Audiotext refers to the ability to access, via telephone, services ranging from weather information to "adult services."

Audiotext blocking and unblocking is a service that is valuable to a segment of telephone customers. It is not possible to predict the fee level that would result if the \$5.00 statutory maximum were removed. Based on the lack of problems reported to us, we conclude that blocking and unblocking can be provided without undue harm to the utility or to other customers who choose not to use the service. Thus, we make no recommendation to change the current statute.